

**Jacqueline Coolidge Oral History Interview**  
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection  
Administrative Information

**Creator:** Jacqueline Coolidge  
**Interviewer:** Russell E. Morgan Jr.  
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**Biographical Note**

Jacqueline (Jackie) Coolidge served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Botswana from 1980 to 1982 as a middle school teacher.

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Oral History Interview

with

Jacqueline Coolidge

November 13, 2019  
Chevy Chase, Maryland

By Russell E. Morgan Jr.

Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection  
John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum

MORGAN: [00:00:02] Ok. Today is Wednesday, the 13th of November 2019. This is Russell Morgan and I'm interviewing Jackie Coolidge, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in Botswana from seven 1980 to seven 1982, and she served as a teacher both in math and social sciences. So good afternoon.

COOLIDGE: Good afternoon.

MORGAN: So tell us why did you join the Peace Corps?

COOLIDGE: [00:00:34] I was very interested in traveling and working abroad, and I was interested in I eventually having a career in related to economic development. I was very interested in Africa. I thought about applying to various other jobs, like with some of the nonprofits or NGOs, and they weren't really interested in taking someone right out of college. But the Peace Corps, of course, was.

MORGAN: [00:01:09] How did you hear about the Peace Corps?

COOLIDGE: [00:01:11] Oh, gosh, I'm sure I've been aware of the Peace Corps. Most of you know, most of my life, certainly from high school. I remember, you know, hearing about it, hearing about John F. Kennedy's famous speech in Ann Arbor. I'm originally from Michigan, so I was from Grand Rapids, Michigan. And when I was an undergrad at Johns Hopkins University, just near here. I took international studies and I, you know, talk to the various counselors and professors telling them that I wanted to have a career related to economic development. And sort of my main faculty advisor suggested the Peace Corps as it was probably being the best way to get started.

MORGAN: [00:02:11] So what was your reaction when you were accepted?

COOLIDGE: [00:02:15] I was happy. I was actually I was relieved. I was afraid. You know, I had tried to apply to some of these other things, like care or I can't even remember a bunch of places. And even I had a cousin who was living in Zimbabwe doing work with some of the refugee camps there. And even he wrote back and said, no, I can't just hire you right out of college. So I was I was relieved that I was able to go into the Peace Corps and have that experience to sort of launch my career.

MORGAN: [00:02:55] So when you got accepted, where you're did you have any preferences of where you wanted to go or what you want to do or?

COOLIDGE: [00:03:02] Yeah, actually, I was most interested in Africa. And I had sort of indicated that, as I recall, somewhere along the line in the process, they indicated, you know, I might be able to have a position in Africa or in Latin America or maybe it was, I think also maybe South Korea or something like that. And I said I was most interested in Africa.

MORGAN: [00:03:30] Why was that?

COOLIDGE: [00:03:32] I don't know. It is it just sort of a feeling of curiosity and interest. I was very interested in African history. I had taken some

African history courses and I loved music from Africa and some of the then heads of state like Julius Nyerere and in Tanzania. And so I thought, that's where I want to go.

MORGAN: [00:04:08] Did your family travel a lot before when you were in school or before then or had you?

COOLIDGE: [00:04:14] I had not had much opportunity to travel. My dad had been in the Navy and the South Pacific in World War Two. And my sister and brother in law also were sort of a Navy family for a while and they were stationed in the Philippines. We couldn't really afford to travel. I had only had one other experience in college during one of the spring breaks, I had an opportunity to attend a conference in Kingston, Jamaica, for a week or so, which I did. And that was pretty exciting. And so I thought, yeah, I can do this.

MORGAN: [00:04:59] So when you were accepted, did they ask you or did you have a preference of what you would do?

COOLIDGE: [00:05:07] I probably yeah, I was not actually all that eager to be a teacher. I had visions of me doing something more, I don't know, profound, but oh, yes, I had some odd notions. But could I probably just because so many people were going in as teachers and especially English teachers and I sort of thought I can do that. Yeah, I studied economics. I want to do something that's, you know, more closely related to the profession I was aiming for because I was not really ever aiming to become a teacher as a profession for me. So this was get into the Peace Corps for the international experience and ultimately, you know, figure out what it is that they can have me do that would fit in.

MORGAN: [00:06:11] So at that time, did you have an idea of what you wanted to be doing in the future?

COOLIDGE: [00:06:17] Yeah, I did want to be an economist, and so I actually did have already have in mind that I thought what I would like to work for the World Bank or something like that and be involved in economic development in terms of policy, you know, government policy, economic

policies, you know, building up infrastructure, building up, you know, all kinds of things to improve the well-being of people and in a poor country.

MORGAN: [00:06:58] So you graduated from college and did thinking about that future vision of yourself, how did you see the Peace Corps fitting into that then?

COOLIDGE: [00:07:08] Well, I understood that it was definitely a good idea to build up some experience living and working abroad. And definitely, you know, since I had been sort of trying to just get hired directly into these positions and they I they wouldn't take me. So I understood that Peace Corps is probably my best bet.

MORGAN: [00:07:30] Interesting. So where were you trained?

COOLIDGE: [00:07:35] The Peace Corps training?

MORGAN: Yes.

COOLIDGE: [00:07:37] Colorado. We went to Colorado. It was for a week, I think. I think it was in June.

MORGAN: [00:07:42] Where? University or?

COOLIDGE: [00:07:45] No, it was. It was actually up in the mountains. And they did that deliberately because Botswana is, you know, a fairly high plateau. And they wanted to give us a little taste of, you know, a relatively high altitude just in case that would be a problem for anybody.

MORGAN: [00:08:06] So when you finish your training, did you feel you were prepared for your assignment?

COOLIDGE: [00:08:13] Yes, I wasn't, but I thought I was.

MORGAN: [00:08:17] And how old were you then?

COOLIDGE: [00:08:19] 22.

MORGAN: [00:08:20] 22. So you were very young then?

COOLIDGE: [00:08:21] Yeah, I was right out of college.

MORGAN: [00:08:23] Right. So what was your initial entry into the country to Botswana like? I mean, how did that happen?

COOLIDGE: [00:08:31] This was it was in a very unfortunate situation because President Seretse Khama, who is the father of the country, had just died and he had been president for quite a while and, you know, beloved in the country, as you know, the founding father of the modern country of Botswana. And so we arrived in a period of mourning in the country and they put us up. It was during the winter break for the University of Botswana.

MORGAN: [00:09:13] That's where you were assigned?

COOLIDGE: [00:09:14] Yes. Well, no, we were that's where we started out for training, I think, in country language training and so on. So it was a period of mourning. And they asked us to, you know, be mindful of that and to not just, you know, be boisterous or rowdy or anything like that, to be respectful of the feelings of everybody. We're really, you know, this was a shock to the country and deep mourning. And so we really were constrained to, you know, behave in a way that would not disturb anybody's feelings.

MORGAN: [00:09:58] And how long were you in that sort of training program in country?

COOLIDGE: [00:10:03] It was a couple of months. It was during the winter break for the university. And so they housed us there in the dorms at the university. And they, how did this go? Yeah, they sent us up almost immediately, sent us all out. We were a fairly large group. There were over 30 of us, 30 as a group. They came in and they sent us out to a on-site experience with other volunteers who were already in place around the country. So I was sent up to, so we had been in the capital city,

which is Gaborone and they sent us up. They sent me up to a town called Palapye, which is where there were a couple other volunteers who were already stationed there. And in fact, that wasn't too far away from the hometown of President Khama, where he was going to have the you know, where there is the funeral, where he was going to be buried. So there were plans to for all of us to go and attend. As it turned out, I wasn't able to do that. I had just a bit of a medical issue. I had to go back down to the capital city to have it attended to. Nothing major. But I ended up missing the missing the funeral.

MORGAN: [00:11:35] So what were the specifics of the job that you were assigned to? The initial job, I guess I should say.

COOLIDGE: [00:11:43] Yeah, the job. Yes. I was supposed to be a math teacher in what they called a community secondary school. So they already had a number of government secondary schools scattered around the country. But they really didn't have the capacity to take in the numbers of students. There was demand. And so they started on sort of another tier of education, which would be somewhat subsidized. But it was really up to the community to start up these schools and to bring them together. So in this community, Mahalapye, the founder of the school, was actually also the head of the opposition party and a communist, Communist Party. And he started up this community secondary school. But I mean, he's not the kind of communist who is like, you know, die hard Soviet or anything like that. He was just of, you know, more of a Marxist philosopher, shall we say, and he was delighted to hear that he could get some Peace Corps teachers to come and teach in his school.

MORGAN: [00:13:13] He was, this is the principal?

COOLIDGE: [00:13:14] He wasn't the principal. He was the like the superintendent. But he was the he was sort of the founder, the sponsor of the school. And then he hired a principal and there was a board and then they hired teachers. And so the school was relatively young already. It was only a couple of years old. And my and other Peace Corps volunteer and I were the first Americans first volunteers, outsiders to be brought into that particular school.

MORGAN: [00:13:52] And this was in which town?

COOLIDGE: [00:13:53] Mahalapye.

MORGAN: [00:13:55] Mahalapye. OK, so can you help us understand some of the experiences that you had during that placement? Or that was just that you didn't actually this is that still training? Where were you?

COOLIDGE: [00:14:09] Now, know, that was that was the actual teaching.

MORGAN: [00:14:12] The actual teaching. So can you share with us some of the experiences you had during your two years there?

COOLIDGE: [00:14:18] Yeah, it was a mixed bag. And so it started out they had recruited me as a math teacher. But when I got there, I it was we found out that they actually had math teachers, but they were short on teachers for a subject that they called development studies. And this would be like in the United States social studies. But it was in the context of a developing country. And but it was a similar mix of history, geography, sociology, economics, you know, an introductory social studies course.

MORGAN: [00:15:01] So tell us a little bit about the school or the number of students and where you lived. And how that all worked.

COOLIDGE: [00:15:09] Oh, boy, that's a long story. The school the school was responsible for our housing. That was that was their contribution to having Peace Corps volunteers, teachers there. So they rented a compound that had two huts in it. I and I went with another guy who had been in the same incoming Peace Corps group, Joel Simon, and he was teaching science. And so there were two huts there. There was a cement block and sort of two room tin roof hut and a smaller mud walled thatch hut. And I decided I, I would actually prefer the mud walled thatch hut, that being thatch being actually a nicer insulation than a tin roof. And also I thought it was more authentic and cozy and all these things. So I



got the mud hut and then we shared an outhouse in the back and there was a standpipe in the front.

MORGAN: [00:16:25] The standpipe for water?

COOLIDGE: [00:16:26] Water. Yeah. So no running, no running water in either of the houses.

MORGAN: [00:16:32] And so you were just in the one house in this hut?

COOLIDGE: [00:16:35] Hut, yeah. One room. Mine was one room.

MORGAN: [00:16:37] So are they round or?

COOLIDGE: [00:16:39] Yes, it was called a rondavel. And it was it was round. It was just big enough for a single bed, a table, a bookshelf, a little two burner cookstove. That was really it.

MORGAN: [00:16:55] What about nighttime? What did you? Could you see? Was it light?

COOLIDGE: [00:16:59] We had to rely on kerosene lanterns and candles.

MORGAN: The petromax or whatever you call them?

COOLIDGE: [00:17:04] They had these sort of gas burner things where you would put in a mantle and the gas would flow through the mantle and you would light that. And that could be very bright. But they were kind of fragile. And if they got knocked around, then it would break and you'd have to get a new mantle. So I was sort of I sort of gave up on that. And so I was more of a good old fashioned kerosene lantern and candles. And that's what I used for light. Yeah. And I'd have to take a bucket out the standpipe outside and haul in the water. So if I wanted to bathe, there was a big galvanized tub and what I would do is I would bring in the water, put it into a pot, a regular cooking pot on the stove, warm up some hot water, mix it with some cool water in a little basin and sit in this galvanized tub.

MORGAN: In your thatched hut.

COOLIDGE: Yes, in my thatched hut. And do a really glorified sponge bath. That was it most days.

MORGAN: [00:18:19] And that was for two years?

COOLIDGE: [00:18:20] Yes. Better part of two years.

MORGAN: [00:18:23] It must have been a good experience.

COOLIDGE: [00:18:25] It was interesting. I did hire out laundry. I tried at one point to do my own laundry and very quickly discovered that, you know, it was just I didn't have the calluses that you would need on your hands. It was you know, I was getting blisters. And so I hired that out to a neighbor.

MORGAN: [00:18:48] I guess, was there such a thing as cleaning or do you just use a broom?

COOLIDGE: [00:18:53] Yeah. Yeah. Around the house, you know, you're on your own. This is just one room. I mean, you know, how much work is it.

MORGAN: [00:19:01] Well, I've never experienced that, so.

COOLIDGE: [00:19:04] Yeah, just a broom and rags to dust and stuff.

MORGAN: [00:19:09] So are there some experiences you had with your students?

COOLIDGE: [00:19:14] I found it really challenging.

MORGAN: How so?

COOLIDGE: In particular, well the classes were pretty big. They were usually about 35 to 38. I think somewhere along the line I probably had a class of maybe 40 for a while and in in theory the kids were sort of strange. So they did have sort of, you know, classes that were considered to be

higher level students in it, mostly meaning that these were kids who spoke reasonable English and understood English reasonably well. But then other classes, the kids were, you know, struggling more with English. And I had to teach in English my Setswana. I did learn Setswana, but only a bit. And I wasn't fluent in it. And in any event, they wanted you to teach in English. This was kind of what they wanted. So I would have to, you know, slow down quite a bit. It took a while for me to figure out how to speak in a way that the students could understand, because if I were just rattling along like this, like an American kid, I just thought, like, la la la. And I could figure out that that they didn't really a lot of them didn't understand. So and you'd start out and you'd say something like, do you understand? And then they would all say, yes ma, but you would you know, you get the sense that this wasn't true.

COOLIDGE: [00:20:50] And eventually I figured out that I should pause more often. And if I asked that question, I said, do you understand? If they said, yes ma, then that meant no. But if they said, ehey ma, then I knew, oh actually yes. That then they were you know, they were more enthusiastic. And that was they were actually responding in really their own language, Setswana. And that was actually an indication that they did understand.

MORGAN: [00:21:28] And were these what were you students from that area?

COOLIDGE: [00:21:33] Yeah, they were. Like, yeah, they were from the town or nearby villages.

MORGAN: [00:21:36] How about the distribution of boys and girls? I mean, was it about equal?

COOLIDGE: [00:21:40] That was about equal. And in fact, if anything in Botswana, it might have been a slight, slightly higher number of girls because the boys tended to be sent off, you know, at the age of 10 or 11, they were more likely to be sent off to the cattle posts. And girls were allowed essentially to stay home and continue with their education. So there was a slight majority of girls.

MORGAN: [00:22:10] And how do you think you were received by the other teachers, particularly the Botswana teachers?

COOLIDGE: [00:22:16] I guess that was sort of a mix of some of them I got along with very well. And they were helpful and supportive. Others of them were a little more standoffish, you might say. And there was, you know, like any organization there, there was they had their own internal politics. And so we weren't really part of that. And I don't think anyone really expected us to, really. But there were sort of factions and clicks and so on. And so we just sort of tried to stay out of that. But it was you know, it was not healthy for the school to have that kind of free action within the ranks of the teachers.

MORGAN: [00:23:07] And we're just two Peace Corps volunteers there at?

COOLIDGE: [00:23:10] First year, and then we got some more. So the school was growing and so we got another Peace Corps volunteer. And then there was also a Canadian who showed up. A couple Canadians, I think so. These were where we have. And we got a couple of British towards the end. A couple of British, yeah.

MORGAN: [00:23:38] And was there a town is this right in a town or was it near?

COOLIDGE: [00:23:41] Right on the edge. Yeah, right on the edge of a town and it was a big town.

MORGAN: [00:23:45] What's big?

COOLIDGE: [00:23:46] Mahalapye, depending upon the season. If it was you know, if they, if people were out in their fields, that was one thing. But in the in the winter months, it would be close to forty thousand, which is really big. But it was at the time it was still considered a quote unquote traditional village just because there was nothing much modern there. I mean, the rail line was going through there in the main highway was going through there and it was actually designated as a place that should become more modern and that the government would sort of invest in the

infrastructure to encourage more modern economic activities. But at the time we were there, it was, you know, that was just barely starting.

MORGAN: [00:24:35] So does that mean that the town didn't have electricity or running water or sewage?

COOLIDGE: [00:24:40] Yeah, definitely. No central sewage or anything. There was the main street essentially, which just came right off the highway and the train went through there. So that immediate downtown, I think had maybe a handful of just streetlights and probably in the train station they may have had in the bank. Yeah there were two banks. They may have had, you know, some running water there and a couple of general stores and they had refrigeration and lights. But for the most part, it was just tiny. It was you could count the buildings that had that on your fingers and that was it. And then everybody else, it was much more traditional and no electricity, no running water.

MORGAN: [00:25:45] So you had time for a vacation, I assume?

COOLIDGE: [00:25:48] Yes.

MORGAN: [00:25:50] Can you tell us a little about some of your experiences, or what you did during vacation time?

COOLIDGE: [00:25:54] The first vacation, that could be a long story. I won't give you the long story. Four of us got together and decided we wanted to go to Tanzania and we wanted to take the train. And it was a bit of an adventure. So we went into Zimbabwe by train and then we had to take a bus to Zambia. And in Lusaka, I think we needed yet another bus to get to Kapiri Mposhi. And then there was we got on the rail and that was the new Tazara railroad built by the Chinese. And that was only a couple of years old. But they were there were some organizational problems and the trains were actually not running all the way through. They would take you to the border and then you'd have to get off and buy a new ticket and wait for the next train to come to pick you up. So they had to train for just sort of meeting each other in the middle.

MORGAN: [00:27:00] So it was to take it, what, two days or so to just do that?

COOLIDGE: [00:27:03] Well, it was the better part of a week to get to Dar es Salaam.

MORGAN: Just to get there?

COOLIDGE: [00:27:08] Yeah, right. And then we got robbed on the way. Like I said, this is an adventure, but we threw ourselves at the mercy of the Tanzania Peace Corps and they were able to give us an advance.

MORGAN: [00:27:19] How did you get robbed? I mean, what was that?

COOLIDGE: [00:27:24] Changing, you know, at the at the train and bus stations, this was a place where, you know, thieves would hang out and they were well organized. So it was just aggressive pickpockets. But it was very you know, it was really just, nothing subtle. It's not like sneaking into your pocket. It was grab, grab and run. It will grab and hand off to the next guy and run. And so I, let's see. I think I might have lost, they ripped a watch off my wrist, while other others of them. One person lost a passport. And then, you know, some traveler's checks and money got missing and so on, so we know it was an adventure and we went to. We often would go to Zimbabwe for like long weekends because that wasn't too far. You could get there easily by train on an overnight train.

MORGAN: [00:28:19] That was, what, 1981?

COOLIDGE: [00:28:22] Yeah, it had just become Zimbabwe and it just, you know, had its election and Robert Mugabe had just been elected.

MORGAN: [00:28:30] So the transition hadn't totally occurred yet?

COOLIDGE: [00:28:33] It was, well, he was in power. But yes, it was brand new. That was a very interesting experience too. But yeah. So we'd go there and we also made a trip to Swaziland, which meant we had to go through South Africa, which was when it was still under apartheid. And so that was very eye-opening experience.

MORGAN: [00:28:57] And but did you do that by car or truck?

COOLIDGE: [00:29:02] Again, bus and train. But we also did hitchhiking and so on the way back, we were hitchhiking. And yet more adventures, nothing too serious, but sort of getting lost, ending up in some little dorp.

MORGAN: [00:29:16] And so it was just like, did you say four of you?

COOLIDGE: [00:29:22] There were, yeah. We would do it in groups of three or four, maybe two.

MORGAN: [00:29:28] But so any other experiences on vacation time that you thought were interesting?

COOLIDGE: [00:29:34] Well, the last one. There were a lot of adventures. The last one my sister had come to visit and she wanted to go on safari. And so we loaded up. Well, my husband's friend had a truck and we loaded up with our tent and camping equipment and we went up to Zimbabwe. And so we went to Victoria Falls and what was then called Hwange Game Reserve. And then we were going to go down to, um, we were going to go over to Harare, where a friend lived, and we decided to take a shortcut because instead of going all the way down all the way south to Bulawayo and then northeast again up to up to Harare, we thought. We looked at the map and we saw, I think we cut across here. So we did that. And when we got over to the main road leading into Harare, there were just an inordinate number of police and army stops and checkpoints. And we're saying, what's going on? And they wouldn't really tell us, but we could sense something was going on.

COOLIDGE: [00:30:56] So we got to our friend's house and they had an apartment and television. And so we turned on the TV and we saw that just on that road going south from Hwange to Bulawayo, there had been a bunch of tourists who had been kidnaped by rebels and were being held. And so that's, you know, that's why everybody was so anxious. And the news was it included, you know, a couple Americans, Canadians, Brits, I don't know. And they also on the local television station, they read out the names of the people who had been kidnaped.

COOLIDGE: [00:31:51] So we said, oh my, oh my! And then, you know, we stayed a day or two there and then headed back south again and took our time. And we were, you know, stopping in the Matopos and enjoying, you know, all the lovely scenery in Zimbabwe. And then again then decided again, oh, instead of just following all the main roads, let's take this little road over here and cross the Limpopo at this little border station over here. And then that's closer to Mahalapye and then we'll get home. So we did all that and, you know, it was nice. And then we get home. And my husband says, well, he wasn't my husband, yet he was my boyfriend. And he said he said, oh, my God, you're here, you're okay! And I said, yeah, we're okay. He said, we were so concerned, we were so worried about you. And apparently so this was a real international incident, this business of the kidnapping of the tourists and what we didn't realize was that somehow the names of the kidnaped people had, even though we saw it on local television, had not made it outside of the country. They put suddenly a block on bad information.

COOLIDGE: [00:33:18] And so people heard about a kidnapping that included two Americans and, you know, feared the worst. And of course, this was not at a time when we had cell phones or anything. And in fact, we weren't making phone calls on a regular basis because it was way too expensive. So, you know, we were just writing postcards and stuff like that. That was communication back then, letters and postcards. And so we said, no, we're fine. And he said, oh, well, we didn't know. We tried calling in Zimbabwe. We tried calling the police station. We tried asking and they wouldn't tell us and they wouldn't tell us. And so everyone's been really concerned. And then I said, oh, well, okay, we're here.

COOLIDGE: [00:34:03] And then I go out, it was Friday night and there was a party. And so we go to the party and the one of the other Peace Corps volunteers, a woman, and she'd already had a couple of drinks. And she said, oh, Jackie, Elsa, the co-Peace Corps director, has been trying to reach you. Something about your mother. And I said, my mother, oh dear! You know, so then I get worried about my mother. And so then we dash and we do track down a telephone and we do make a phone call. And then it turned out that my parents had heard about this incident.



They were scared. You know, two of their daughters, and they had been calling frantically down to the Peace Corps office. The Peace Corps office hadn't even been aware that I was out of town because I was supposed to file a something or other, which I didn't do. And so, boy, was I in deep doo-doo. And they were scared. And then Elsa had, was sure and had told everybody that, oh well, when they come back through the border at Francistown, I have alerted the Botswana customs facilities that they will, they'll let us know immediately. And of course, we came through a different station and there was no word. So here I was back in the country for hours and she didn't know. And so that upset her even more.

COOLIDGE: [00:35:29] So, yeah, that was, uh. So we had to make phone calls and fess up that I had, you know, essentially taken an unauthorized vacation. But no, actually, it's actually tragic because those people who had been kidnaped were killed. They were killed. And this was when there was, you know, ethnic civil war going on in Zimbabwe after it had become independent. So this was the, you know, roughly speaking, Shona and Ndebele fighting. And so this was a real tragedy, you know, a real tragedy.

MORGAN: [00:36:12] Well, it's good you were safe. And I'm sure that your parents were happy as well as the Peace Corps director.

COOLIDGE: Oh, yes.

MORGAN: So looking back at your tour service, what do you think were your main accomplishments?

COOLIDGE: [00:36:28] I think that for some of my students who were, you know, really sufficiently fluent in English, that they could really understand what I was saying and writing on the blackboard. I do think, you know, they got an interesting perspective from an American on, you know, some of these issues of history and geography and economics and so on. And, you know, got to know Americans. And I think they found us more, um. We could have sort of a more familiar relationship with them. The Tswana had tended to prefer the more British traditional system, which

is, you know, yes sir, no sir. You know, a real distance usually between student and teacher. And so we were a little more pal-sy. And so they got to know Americans in that kind of context. And I think that, was probably, you know, a nice thing. I think they enjoyed having American teachers, certainly as a novelty, if nothing else.

MORGAN: [00:37:52] Can you say anything about how you tracked any of these students or?

COOLIDGE: [00:37:59] Not many of the students. One of them started out, he looked like he was really going to be like a track star and but he ended up with bone cancer and that was a sad thing. You have to remember, this was also when AIDS was just hitting. And to be honest, a lot of the teachers ended up getting AIDS and dying. My husband and I had to get tested when we came, you know, not immediately. But it was pretty clear pretty quickly that we needed to be tested. And so we were fine. We were lucky. But Botswana was one of the hardest hit by AIDS. And as I understand, for the Peace Corps, more recently, they almost ended the Peace Corps program. They were planning to phase out Peace Corps from Botswana. And I think for a while they may have briefly done so. But then the AIDS epidemic became so, you know, such an enormous problem. They brought back a lot of health and community health and social workers because it wasn't just the disease, it was also orphans. And it was so devastating. It was, you know, it became its own sociological problem that so many of, you know, families, adults, working age, family age, parent aged adults were just devastated.

MORGAN: [00:39:37] Did it impact the students as well as the teachers?

COOLIDGE: [00:39:40] Oh, yes. Oh, yes. I know that because they were.

MORGAN: [00:39:43] You knew some of these people personally then?

COOLIDGE: [00:39:45] I knew some of our language teachers and a couple of them died. And a couple of them died. And I don't know for sure, you know, specifically named students because I didn't really stay in touch with the students. But there were definitely, it was known that some of the

teachers were sleeping with some of the students and the whole area, as I said, on the main railroad and road network with, you know, truckers going up and down and so on. So it was one of the hardest hit areas in the world actually. Botswana was one of the hardest hit countries and Mahalapye and that whole corridor, transport corridor, was one of the hardest hit in the world.

MORGAN: [00:40:46] Did any Peace Corps volunteers come back and come in specifically to work in the AIDS area?

COOLIDGE: [00:40:52] That was not our group, but afterwards yes, my understanding is yes, definitely.

MORGAN: [00:40:57] Well, that would be very traumatic. Also in term of your tour of service, are there some things that when you look back, you regret?

COOLIDGE: [00:41:11] Yeah, a couple of things. I mean, I look back, I feel silly about it. There was a problem with just classroom discipline, right? And so we tried.

MORGAN: How so?

COOLIDGE: [00:41:26] Oh, just, you know, just kids being unruly. Yeah. I mean, these are you know, these are 12, 13, 14 year olds. And so a rambunctious age. And so and with such large classes, it was always an effort to, you know, try to keep them focused on class. So we started out, you know, a lot of the Tswana teachers would carry around a stick and they would beat the kids. And that was their main method of discipline. And of course, we said we're not going to do that. And so we were coming up with other possibilities. And so we started on a system of demerits. So, you know, yeah, we're going to give you a demerit. But of course, that had to be backed up by something. So we had them. We said, OK, if you get three demerits, you're going to have to clean the teacher's toilets. Well, toilets need cleaning. So we had that system in place. But then, you know, there came a point when some of the students just said, well, I'm not going to do that. And so then there's the

question of enforcement. Or they would say, oh, you know, Ma Coolidge, just beat me, just beat me, I don't want to do it. I'd say, no.

COOLIDGE: [00:42:54] And then, you know, it was sort of a question of like turning them over to the principal, but then the principal would beat them and, you know, and so. At some point, Joel, the other Peace Corps volunteer said, well, you know, when in Rome, do as the Romans do. So he started, you know, to bring a stick. Basically it was, I mean, you're not banging him over the head. You'd say, put out your hand and then you use, you know. But yes, corporal punishment. And somewhere along the line, I thought, well, if everyone else is doing it, I'll do it too. But this was just I immediately, you know, abandoned that. I just couldn't, you know, couldn't do that. But I did, you know, I did try a couple of times and I feel like an idiot for even trying.

MORGAN: [00:43:38] Remind me, how old were these students?

COOLIDGE: [00:43:40] 12, 13, 14. They were bigger than I was, right? You know, I'm a little pipsqueak. No, that wouldn't have happened. None of that was a problem in our school, to that degree. Other schools there was more of a problem. There was you know, there were Peace Corps young women teachers who were raped and. Oh, yes.

MORGAN: [00:44:06] In your school area or in other?

COOLIDGE: No.

MORGAN: This is in other assignments?

COOLIDGE: [00:44:10] Right. Yeah. And it was you know, these were serious risks. Actually, this is one other thing I wanted to share on the record. I was lucky, I never had any really serious problems. But as you probably know, most Peace Corps volunteers at the very beginning, they're sent for a village live-in.

MORGAN: Right.

COOLIDGE: And we all were. Ours was actually even a little longer because they were, you know, they were having trouble juggling with this whole situation, with the mourning over President Khama.

MORGAN: [00:44:48] A village live-in means live with a family in the community to sensitize you?

COOLIDGE: [00:44:51] For a week. Yeah. And you would get your language training in the context of being able to practice with, you know, a family. And so I was there and I was assigned to a family and we got there in the late afternoon and we, you know, we had food with us as a contribution to the household. And so this was a family compound with, you know, three or four huts.

MORGAN: [00:45:30] These mud with the thatch?

COOLIDGE: [00:45:30] Mostly, yeah, I think one of them, the father had a smaller, well a cement block house, but nothing very big. But I got there and so I had, you know, a bag, a suitcase. And the next thing I know, they're bringing the suitcase into the father's hut.

MORGAN: Your suitcase?

COOLIDGE: My suitcase. And they're bringing a bed, a cot into his bedroom. And I, I was, you know, saying, oh my god, no, no, this is not right. So I went off to find one of the official Peace Corps language teachers who was also in the same village as a number of us. So there was maybe a half a dozen of us or eight or so. And then so I went to Buntle, her name, and I said Buntle, they're trying to put me in the same bed, hut and bedroom with the father. And she said, oh that's not good. And so she went in and there was, you know, a long talk, long talk, long talk. And eventually one of the boys brought my bag out and into another little hut and moved the cot over there. But this guy, you know, this is the father of the household. And he had really wanted me to his room.

MORGAN: [00:47:11] That was his expectation.

COOLIDGE: [00:47:13] That was his expectation. And now he was unhappy. And so I had wanted to be moved. You know, I don't want to be in this situation.

MORGAN: Of course.

COOLIDGE: And they, the response, you know, the Peace Corps response was, oh no, that would be offensive.

MORGAN: Tough it out.

COOLIDGE: And so I had to stay.

MORGAN: Oh my god.

COOLIDGE: And he was, you know, always eyeing me, if you will. He never touched me.

MORGAN: [00:47:41] Right.

COOLIDGE: [00:47:41] Nothing physical ever happened. But he was definitely, you know, looking at me like. And so I ended up avoiding him. It was an awkward situation with the entire family. So most people you would think, you know, most people you hear about, Peace Corps people, that their village live-in is this heartwarming, loving experience that they, you know, that they look back on with such fondness and warmth and all that. And I was just, I was basically, you know, hanging on to the edge of the family. I mean, I managed to develop a bit of a relationship with, you know, some of the other women in the family. And, okay, they were showing me how to pound millet and stuff like that. And, you know, I had to go through with some of the just, you know, standard household things that we were supposed to share in. But I was forever trying to dodge and avoid this guy. And he was huge, by the way. He was like six foot three, at least six foot three, probably at least three hundred pounds. He was enormous, probably pushing 60, I would guess. And so I was avoiding him for the whole two weeks. And finally I thought, okay, I'm

now it's the last day and I'm ready to leave and I will look him in the eye and, you know, I'll say my goodbyes cordially.

COOLIDGE: [00:49:19] So I was sitting down for breakfast around the fire, a little fire, a little area where they eat. And he came up and he looked at me and he sat down, you know, just opposite me. And he patted his, looked at me, patted his crotch and said nice in English. And I again, I just finished up and fled. You know, this was just so obnoxious. But I do understand that, you know, from what I've heard over the years in the Peace Corps, this kind of thing is not that unusual. And Peace Corps didn't, you know, had a hard time figuring out how to deal with this situation because, you know, this guy might not have been seen as being the nicest and most hospitable host in the world, even by local standards. But it was considered, you know, his prerogative to behave that way. And I, you know, I don't know how, I've heard that Peace Corps has struggled with this kind of problem and worse, and worse definitely, over the years. But this was when I was there, I really felt I was on my own and just coping with this on my own because. Yeah, I mean, the official Peace Corps response is, no, we're not going to move you because that would insult him. And he's, you know, he's a village elder.

MORGAN: [00:50:56] That's a tough one to take. Well, congratulations, you survived.

COOLIDGE: I survived. Yes.

MORGAN: That's an interesting story. Well, on the flip side of that, what were some of the most meaningful relationships that you felt you had with the students or the community that you were with?

COOLIDGE: [00:51:18] I liked, we had some very nice neighbors that I liked, and some of the teachers that I worked with were really wonderful, very welcoming and supportive. The teachers, you know, very dedicated and professional. I wish there had been more of them. The teachers in particular, you know, like I said, that was that was there was sort of constant friction in that school. The neighbors were very nice.

MORGAN: [00:51:53] But let me ask, how many teachers were the ballpark total in the school?

COOLIDGE: [00:51:58] Oh, I would say 16, 18.

MORGAN: [00:52:03] So that's quite a few.

COOLIDGE: [00:52:06] Yeah. And it was growing and we helped we help with plans to expand the school. And so one of the things I was able to do, aside from just teaching, just teaching, I shouldn't say that, was putting together a grant proposal for the school to expand. So that was one time when I sort of felt like I was putting my economic skills to work and it did happen. And we eventually went back there in 2013. And so I saw that, yes, they actually had expanded the school. And that was, hey, look at that! They really did it.

MORGAN: [00:52:48] So could you say what you learned most from the people who you worked with?

COOLIDGE: [00:52:55] I mean, not just the people I work with, but the community. Yeah. It was it was really an opportunity to step up, step away from sort of, you know, your usual cultural context. And first of all, you find out that, hey, you know, people are people everywhere and, you know, hanging out with the neighbors in the evening. It would be, it was a very familiar thing. I could, you know, write letters home to my parents and say, this is so familiar. I mean, they're just, you know, talking about their kids and neighborhood gossip and stuff like, it was just the most normal thing in the world. But also, of course, there were a lot of cultural differences. And being away from your usual social and cultural context, you're sort of left with, you know, who am I? And that was, I think, a useful experience and a good experience and both professionally and personally and, you know, to become accustomed to another culture, another way of thinking, and to be able to come back home and to share that, I think was a benefit, you know, to the United States, to have your friends and neighbors who come back home and say, hey, I was in Africa for two years, and people would say, oh my god.



MORGAN: You survived.

COOLIDGE: And you say, hey, you know, they're just like us. They sit around in the evening and they talk about the kids and they gossip about the neighbors just like we do. It's, you know, this is the human condition.

MORGAN: [00:54:40] So in the beginning, you said that you were interested in the economics and maybe getting into the even that thought, if I remember, about getting to the World Bank. So my question is, how did the Peace Corps experience or how do you feel the Peace Corps experience influenced or impacted your life and particularly your plans for your own future?

COOLIDGE: [00:55:01] It did ultimately solidify my notion that I did want to continue in this work professionally. And, you know, I went back and got a master's degree and went into work. I was with a consulting firm for a while and then in the World Bank. And I think it is, it gives you, I think it's definitely a good idea for anybody who does this kind of work and especially policy work. You know, at sort of the higher levels like the World Bank tends to do with, you know, high level government officials in the capital city, blah, blah, blah, to have a real first-hand experience with what life is like in a typical village in some of these countries, what the challenges are, what life is like. And, you know, so that is not theoretical and it's not abstract. And it's not just assuming that, you know, a place like Mahalapye, Botswana, is just going to be like, you know, Cleveland, Ohio, or something. Grand Rapids, Michigan. So I do think that those of us who have had this kind of experience and then go on in our careers and, you know, working at a more abstract level, it's good that we have this lived experience and not just for a short period of time, not just a visit of, you know, a couple of weeks or a month, but when you have to stay in one place in this, you know, in this kind of setting for two years, you can't just tell yourself, oh well, I'll just, you know, I might not like this or that, but it's only two weeks and whatever. If you're there for two years, you really have to come to terms with everything, you know, all of the language and cultural and living standard issues. And you have to you have to cope with that.

COOLIDGE: [00:57:14] Otherwise, you know, people who leave early, you know, there were people who ended up leaving after a few months. They would just say, nah, this is not for me. Ok, I would you know, it's fair. That's fine. But, you know, sticking it out for long enough to really have a lived experience, I think is very important.

MORGAN: [00:57:40] Remind me, how many students were in the school?

COOLIDGE: [00:57:42] Oh, in school, okay. I forgot that total in the school, let me think.

MORGAN: [00:57:49] And this went from what, first grade to?

COOLIDGE: [00:57:52] No, this is like junior, junior secondary school, so it would be it would be equivalent to our seventh, eighth, ninth grade. And there were probably, I'm guessing, in the ballpark of 250 students.

MORGAN: [00:58:09] In that cohort?

COOLIDGE: [00:58:11] Yeah. In those grades.

MORGAN: [00:58:12] Great. Wow. And then they went on to a high school?

COOLIDGE: [00:58:17] They would either go on to transfer into a government secondary school to finish up. So they would have done what do you call it, O levels?

MORGAN: [00:58:29] Were they on the British system?

COOLIDGE: [00:58:31] Roughly.

MORGAN: [00:58:32] They didn't do the Cambridge though, did they?

COOLIDGE: [00:58:34] No. So it would be roughly on the level of I think, all levels. And then if they wanted their A-levels, they would have to go into a government or private secondary school or they would go into trade school. So my husband was teaching in a what they call the brigades,

which is basically a trade school with a live-in apprenticeship program sort of built in. So they would have the class work in the morning and had hands-on contract work. It was on-the-job training contract, which they did. So they were bringing in money and they were supposed to be self-financing. And in my husband's case it was, but it was it was hard to keep that going too.

MORGAN: [00:59:18] Can you speak a little bit about what had been the long-term impacts? I mean, you're now retired and you're able to think back on not only to say how many years ago it's been, but what do you think are some of the longer term impacts that have resulted from your involvement, the Peace Corps?

COOLIDGE: [00:59:39] Oh, gosh. Well, I mean, I.

MORGAN: [00:59:40] Both on yourself and on those and let's say your family.

COOLIDGE: [00:59:43] My family. Well, my husband, you know, we ended up getting together when we were both in the same village in my Mahalapye. And so we have that shared experience.

MORGAN: [00:59:57] Is he Botswanan?

COOLIDGE: [01:00:00] No, he was from the Netherlands. He was a Dutch volunteer.

MORGAN: Oh okay.

COOLIDGE: [01:00:05] So at the very end, I ended up sort of moving into his house, which was a nicer house, because the Dutch volunteers were considered sort of a higher level professional than most of the Peace Corps volunteers.

MORGAN: That's funny.

COOLIDGE: [01:00:19] Yeah, but so we had that that shared experience. Our daughter, you know, we continued to work overseas off and on for quite a while. And our daughter was born in Nairobi. And so we have this, you

know, experience of living and working overseas, starting out in Botswana. And, you know, we look back on Botswana and we're very proud of it in many ways because Botswana is one of the few countries that really did well. Now, they were lucky in that they have diamond mines, so they've got real big revenue earner. But, you know, you think of all these other countries that also have mineral wealth and they you know, they just got, you know, swallowed by corruption. And Botswana didn't do that. It was truly a multiparty democracy, even if one party would, you know, dominate and win pretty much all the time. It was a multi-party democracy with an independent judiciary and a free press and a local level of governance that was called the Kgotla. And it was, you would, it would be similar in function to a New England town hall. Now, this is you know, this was an indigenous thing. This is not something they learned from, you know, Americans or Brits or anything else. This was purely an indigenous thing. But as you know, imagine a town hall and, you know, people bringing up the various issues and problems and how to resolve them and debate, debate, debate, debate, debate, debate, debate. Everybody gets to have their say. And it's long and it's tedious, but everybody has their chance to say. And then pretty much the elders, you know, you know, talk among themselves a little bit and come back and they say, well, we think we should do it this way. And then mostly people say, okay, that's fine. It's, you know, but there's been input. There's been voice.

COOLIDGE: [01:02:21] And we found that, you know, that's an unusual situation. And I think it did help ground good governance in Botswana. And they managed to avoid a lot of the problems of corruption and infighting and so on that you saw in a lot of other countries. So we were always very proud of that and would talk about Botswana as an example of it. You know, maybe not pointing out, be like Botswana, because you can't just snap your fingers and do that, of course, but as an example of an African country that that had its own indigenous forms of governance and was able to use those apparently to build on. It was sort of a mixture of the British parliamentary system and so on. But they had this bedrock basis of local self-government that I think helped them. And so it was an interesting case study, you know, trying to figure out what bits and pieces might be transferable to other places.

MORGAN: [01:03:36] Have you kept in contact with any of your former students or faculty, the teachers or anything?

COOLIDGE: [01:03:42] No, not the.

MORGAN: [01:03:43] Or going back, any of that?

COOLIDGE: [01:03:45] There was one, um, one of my former language teachers that I was in touch with very briefly, because he was a journalist in the capital city. And I was back there once or twice professionally and didn't actually get together with him again. He is another one who was suffering from AIDS. So he was, you know.

MORGAN: Under therapy.

COOLIDGE: Yeah, he was struggling, you know, health wise. And others of them, as I said, died of AIDS earlier, you know, because that hit that hit Botswana so hard and so fast. So a lot of people remember, died before there was really an effective treatment.

MORGAN: [01:04:33] Mm hmm. Wow.

COOLIDGE: [01:04:37] But, yeah, some of the some of the other Peace Corps volunteers, yeah, I've been in touch with some of them and that's fun too.

MORGAN: [01:04:44] Yeah. Old war stories. Have you gone back to Botswana?

COOLIDGE: [01:04:48] Yeah. So professionally a couple of times in the '90s. Yeah, late '80s, early '90s.

MORGAN: Is this with the World Bank?

COOLIDGE: First with a consulting firm. Also with the World Bank. And then my husband and I both went back there for a holiday vacation in 2013 and did another little safari. Oh, we did another safari. Oh my god, I forgot to

tell you about the other safari that we did in the Okavango Delta, which was really amazing. But oh well.

MORGAN: [01:05:20] Well, when you went back, did you go up to your old go back to your old town?

COOLIDGE: [01:05:25] Yes, I did. And it was much it was, you know, somewhat bigger. It's always been a fairly big town.

MORGAN: 40,000.

COOLIDGE: Yes. But it now had more modern amenities in the area.

MORGAN: Electricity.

COOLIDGE: Yes.

MORGAN: [01:05:38] Water, hopefully.

COOLIDGE: [01:05:40] Yes, yes. Quite a bit more. But you could still see this sort of hollowing out of middle aged people because so many had died of AIDS. You know, this was you know, it was noticeable, the absence of, you know, people my age.

MORGAN: [01:05:59] Yeah, no that's. And men and women?

COOLIDGE: Yeah, definitely.

MORGAN: No, no question.

COOLIDGE: Definitely.

MORGAN: And then babies.

COOLIDGE: [01:06:08] Orphans. There were a lot of orphans.

MORGAN: [01:06:09] Well, right. Right. Do you continue to be involved in the Peace Corps in any way?

COOLIDGE: [01:06:15] Not a lot. But I did go down to the, there was a big event launching this new museum, if you will, an event at the Kennedy Center a couple of months ago.

MORGAN: [01:06:31] Oh, when they had that film?

COOLIDGE: Yes.

MORGAN: Okay. Oh yeah. Some people find it great to continue involvement with the Peace Corps, others don't. Why do you think? You did that, but not a strong thing.

COOLIDGE: [01:06:54] Some people, some of my friends actually came back here and ended up working as professionals in the Peace Corps administration for a period of time. And so they have, they've formed more of a network, if you will, a tighter network, I would say. The rest of us, you know, we're just scattered. We're so far apart. But yeah, it is actually with Facebook has been, you know, made it easier to find and connect again with some of them. And that's been nice. And the guy who shared the compound with me, you know, I sort of lost touch with him. He married another Peace Corps volunteer who had been part of our group, and they settled in New Jersey. And when we were taking our daughter around to visit schools, we went to Pratt because she was interested in art school. And, you know, that was their big day of having lots of people come and look at it as a prospective college location, and we bumped into them.

MORGAN: [01:08:02] Serendipitously.

COOLIDGE: Yes.

MORGAN: [01:08:02] Oh, my gosh, wow.

COOLIDGE: We immediately as soon as we were all finished, we said, oh we have to have lunch together. And we did. That was fun.

MORGAN: [01:08:09] Oh, very nice. Yeah. Well, I want to thank you for taking time to do this interview, and I think people will find it very interesting.

COOLIDGE: [01:08:21] Thank you. It was nice to reminisce.

MORGAN: [01:08:25] Yes.

[END OF INTERVIEW]